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## ***Beyond 'Just teaching content': exploring language-aware teaching practices to clarify the EMI-ICLHE continuum in higher education***

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### **ABSTRACT**

Universities are increasingly offering courses in English or, less frequently, in other additional languages. This practice is often labelled EMI (English- Medium Instruction) when the focus lies on content, or ICLHE (Integrating Content and Language in Higher Education) when there are dual content and language objectives. However, these theoretical concepts encounter key issues in practice. First, even in EMI contexts, the additional language cannot be ignored, as it poses challenges for students and instructors. Second, the boundaries between EMI and ICLHE remain unclear, generating uncertainties regarding teaching aims and methods. This study addresses these issues through a practice-based analysis. Drawing on a community of practice (CoP) involving twelve lecturers teaching in English or Dutch at a French-speaking university, we describe four language-aware teaching practices that account for the presence of the additional language in learning objectives, teaching approaches and assessment. These data also highlight the specific role played by language teachers in courses taught through an additional language. Building on this empirical material, we propose an illustrated continuum of concrete language-aware practices from content focus (EMI) to content and language objectives (ICLHE). These findings are discussed to provide conceptual clarity on the continuum and offer guidance for researchers and practitioners.

**KEYWORDS** English-medium instruction (EMI); integrating content and language in higher education (ICLHE); content and language integrated learning (CLIL); EMI-ICLHE continuum; multilingual higher education; language-aware teaching practices

### **Introduction**

The practice of teaching in an additional language, mainly English, at universities has been labelled in many different ways (Macaro 2018). A very commonly used term is EMI (English Medium Instruction) frequently defined as:

the use of the English language to teach academic subjects (other than English itself) in countries or jurisdictions where the first language (L1) of the majority of the populations is not English. (Macaro 2018, 19)

Based on this definition, EMI is often described as having a single primary objective, namely content learning, and in which 'language learning is often not an explicit educational aim' (Curle et al. 2020, 12). This content-focus approach is frequently contrasted with other educational forms which incorporate not only content but also language goals, such as CLIL (Content and language integrated learning), mainly used to refer to pre-tertiary education, or more recently ICLHE (Integrated Language and Language in Higher Education), used to specify the tertiary education context. The EMI / CLIL or ICLHE educational approaches being difficult to delineate, they are often placed on a continuum going from a focus on content to dual focus content and language (Curle et al. 2020; Macaro 2018; Thompson and McKinley 2018).

Although the distinction between EMI and CLIL or ICLHE and the continuum connecting them appear clear in theory, they become considerably more blurred in practice for several reasons. First, it seems difficult to assume that courses taught in an additional language can focus solely on content while ignoring the role of language. The use of an additional language can limit students' comprehension, and teachers often need to manage language-related challenges even in courses officially framed as content-only (Dang, Bonar, and Yao 2023). Additionally, the motivation to teach or attend courses in an additional language is frequently linked to improving students' language proficiency (Wächter and Maiworm 2014; Zhang and Pladevall-Ballester 2023). Moreover, the terms EMI and ICLHE or CLIL are often unclear to practitioners. Content teachers, who rarely receive targeted professional development or collaborate with researchers in the field (Lasagabaster 2022), may overlook these concepts and must navigate independently how to address the challenges of teaching their courses in an additional language, leading to a wide range of interpretations of the courses' objectives (Gronchi 2024).

Researchers increasingly stress that teaching courses in an additional language – most often English – is complex and far more than just teaching a content in another language. It entails a range of cultural, organisational, political, and pedagogical challenges (Bradford 2016; Sercu et al. 2025). To account for this complexity in practice, many scholars have proposed alternative terms or supporting tools, such as guides or quality assessment frameworks. For example, the term EME (English Medium Education) was proposed in order to move beyond a sole focus on instruction and to consider other aspects, such as teaching, learning, research or administration (Dafouz and Smit 2016, 2020). The EMEMUS framework (English-Medium Education in Multilingual University Settings) extends the notion of EME by embedding it within multilingual university contexts, where English interacts dynamically with other languages across institutional, disciplinary, and sociocultural dimensions (Dafouz and Smit 2016, 2020). The EMI-QE (English-Medium Instruction Quality Evaluation) (Thumvichit and Laoriandee 2024), an instrument to assess EMI in HE was also introduced to connect theory and practice by offering a tool that can evaluate good practices in EMI.

In order to account for this complexity and to try to bridge the gap between theoretical notions and practical reality, we propose adopting a practice-based approach to examining directly teachers' practices. This seems particularly necessary, as many applied linguists stress the importance of grounding research in teaching practice (Rose 2019; Sato and Loewen 2022). Moreover, research on content courses taught in an additional language in higher education is still largely driven by linguists, which may overlook the practical challenges faced by content teachers (Macaro and Aizawa 2024). A practice-based analysis also aligns with Macaro's reflections on the terminology used to describe foreign-language courses: reflecting on his definition of EMI, Macaro emphasises that EMI should be considered as a non-value-laden concept, allowing practitioners to develop the pedagogical practices they deem necessary, which may in turn contribute to theory development. He writes:

If the starting point has no presuppositions, content teachers will feel less threatened by externally conceived pedagogical theories and more like actors in shaping pedagogical practices appropriate for their context, leading to eventual theory development. (Macaro 2018, 298)

Therefore, this paper aims to clarify notions and lead to theory development, based on concrete pedagogical practices of content teachers. We specifically want to answer two key questions: (1) how the presence of an additional language can be acknowledged in content courses given in an additional language, as we know this language can be challenging even in a content-objective class, and (2) how this consideration is concretely enacted along the continuum between content-driven approaches, such as EMI, and content- and language- driven approaches, such as CLIL or ICLHE.

To address these questions, we first describe four teaching practices identified during communities of practice (CoP) that brought together instructors teaching in English or Dutch at a French-speaking university. These practices, which we refer to as 'language-aware teaching practices', were selected because they take into account the presence of the additional language in the learning objectives,

teaching methods and assessment. Drawing on these descriptions, we seek to situate these language-aware practices on the content (EMI) vs. content and language (ICLHE/CLIL) continuum and thereby further delineate and illustrate the continuum between EMI and ICLHE/CLIL in higher education. The resulting illustrated continuum clarifies theoretical concepts through empirical realities but also provide practical guidance for key stakeholders in foreign-language programs, supporting both institutional and pedagogical development of courses given in an additional language.

The article begins with a review of the relevant literature to situate the study within debates on EMI and ICLHE/CLIL terminology. We then present the methodological framework and describe the empirical context in which the data were gathered. This is followed by a description of the selected language-aware teaching practices and of how these practices inform the EMI–ICLHE continuum. The article concludes with implications for research, pedagogy, and institutional policy in higher-education settings.

## Literature review

### *Theoretical framework: an EMI-ICLHE continuum*

Content courses in an additional language, often English, have been labelled in a wide variety of ways, including the terms bilingual education, immersion, CBLT (Content-Based Language Teaching), CBI (Content Based Instruction), CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning), ICLHE (Integrated Content and Language Integrated Learning), EMI (English (as a) Medium (of) Instruction), EME (English Medium Education), and many more (Carrió-Pastor 2021; Macaro 2018). This proliferation of labels has prompted numerous analyses and debates aimed at clarifying what these terms actually denote, how they should be understood, and whether they accurately reflect the realities of practice (Airey 2016; Brown and Bradford 2016; Carrió-Pastor 2021; Macaro 2018; Moncada-Comas and Block 2021).

Within these various attempts at definition, and with the goal of clarification, it has been suggested that these concepts could be distinguished according to their dominant objective. Therefore, a continuum of pedagogical approaches has been proposed, ranging from courses with a primarily content-oriented focus to those with a more language-oriented focus (Curle et al. 2020; Macaro 2018; Thompson and McKinley 2018). Between these extremes lie courses that aim to achieve both language proficiency and content mastery. In this continuum, EMI (English Medium Instruction) would be on the content-side, as it is widely defined as:

The use of English language to teach academic subjects (other than English itself) in countries or jurisdictions where the first language of the majority of the population is not English. (Macaro 2018, 19)

At the language-side, we find language courses such as LSP (Language for specific purposes) or LAP (Language for Academic Purposes), where both the curriculum and assessment are primarily centered on language acquisition.

At an intermediate position, characterised by a dual focus on both content and language, we find the approach of CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning), defined by (Marsh 2002) as:

[...] a generic umbrella term which would encompass any activity in which a foreign language is used as a tool in the learning of a non-language subject in which both language and the subject have a joint curricular role. (Marsh 2002, 58)

The term CLIL being essentially used in pre-tertiary education, the term ICLHE (Integrating Content and Language in Higher Education) was coined in 2003 to have a distinct denomination for tertiary education CLIL (Ruiz-Madrid and Fortanet-Gómez 2023). For the sake of clarity, we will use the term ICLHE throughout the text, keeping in mind that the context is higher education. Figure 1 illustrates this EMI-ICLHE/CLIL continuum.

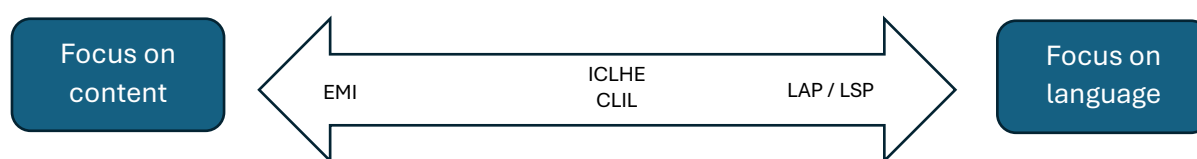


**Figure 1.** Continuum of teaching concepts that integrate content and/or language learning in higher education (adapted from Macaro 2018; Thompson and McKinley 2018).

Among these various terms, it is also interesting to note the presence – or absence – of language specification. Terms such as CLIL, ICLHE, LSP, and LAP do not explicitly prescribe a language; any language can be used within these frameworks. In contrast, from a terminological perspective, the label English Medium Instruction (EMI) explicitly foregrounds the use of English, likely because English is by far the most common additional language employed as the medium of instruction in such programs (Wingrove et al. 2025). However, it is important to note that the underlying practice – teaching academic content through a language other than the dominant language of the country or jurisdiction – is not restricted to English. In certain regions, teaching academic content through a non-English additional language can be particularly relevant. This may occur, for example, when key disciplinary literature is available in another language, or when students need to acquire proficiency in that language for their future socio-professional integration. A case in point is the French-speaking region of Belgium situated in the south of the Dutch-speaking region, where some university courses are delivered in Dutch in a French-speaking university (Louis, Degraeve, and Hiligsmann 2026). This is particularly the case in disciplines such as law, political science, or economics, where essential resources are in Dutch and professional practice frequently requires a solid command of the language (Hiligsmann and Degraeve 2021). Accordingly, universities organise courses in these disciplines taught in Dutch. In such contexts, one could appropriately speak of Dutch Medium Instruction (DMI): the Dutch language is used to teach academic subjects (other than Dutch itself) in regions where the first language of the majority of the population is not Dutch.

### *Theory vs. practical reality*

Although the definitions of the key teaching approaches and the related continuum offer a useful framework for understanding the variety of forms of teaching and learning in an additional language in higher education, this categorisation is ‘open to challenges’ (Macaro 2018, 43) and several questions arise in actual implementation of content courses given in an additional language.

First, it is worth questioning whether it is truly realistic to assume that the language used in content-driven approaches, such as EMI, is merely a medium of instruction and not a subject of attention at all. EMI contexts are typically characterised by the use of English as an additional language for students, as well as often for teachers, which can have significant consequences for both groups.

For students, research has shown that limited proficiency in the target language affects their comprehension of course content, increases their workload, and limits their ability to participate actively in class (Charoenpornsook and Thumvichit 2025; Evans and Morrison 2018; Klaassen 2001). To support them, institutions usually rely on one of four models, as described by Macaro (2018): a preparatory year, a selective admission based on language proficiency, in-course language support, or the so-called ‘ostrich model’, in which neither selection nor support is provided. However, these support systems are often limited or only partially effective – for example, focusing on receptive skills, while students primarily struggle with productive ones (Curle et al. 2020).

Collectively, these elements demonstrate that it seems unrealistic to overlook the pedagogical attention required by the presence of the additional language, even in a content-driven approach such as EMI.

For teachers, the use of English impacts their work on multiple levels. They frequently report feelings of linguistic insecurity, increased course preparation time, and a tendency to adopt less interactive or student-centered pedagogical practices (Bolton and Kuteeva 2012; Lasagabaster and Doiz 2022; Snippe and Jochems 1998; Yuan 2023). While they are often aware of the language-related difficulties their students face, they commonly lack strategies to effectively support them. It has been widely documented that content teachers are often insufficiently prepared for EMI instruction, not only in terms of language proficiency, but also in terms of pedagogical strategies tailored to EMI contexts (Dang, Bonar, and Yao 2023; Lasagabaster 2022; Lasagabaster and Fernández-Costales 2025). Giving a class in an additional language is thus not just teaching content in another language.

Beyond the difficulties posed by the use of an additional language in EMI courses, it is surprising to overlook its presence, given the motivations behind the implementation of such programs. Developing language skills – mainly English – and the ability to work/live in English-speaking environments are key drivers for both the institutions that introduce EMI (Wächter and Maiworm 2014) and the students who enroll in these courses (Chapple 2015; Nguyen et al. 2023; Serna-Bermejo and Herrarte 2023, 2023; Zhang and Pladevall-Ballester 2023). It therefore seems contradictory to consider these programs as a means of enhancing language proficiency while subsequently treating the target language as if it were not among their intended objectives.

These findings demonstrate that even in content-driven approaches like EMI, the additional language can create challenges such as increased workload, content comprehension difficulties, or interactional barriers. Therefore, it is essential that teachers remain aware of the language dimension, even in courses where language is not an explicit learning objective.

In addition to the challenges posed by the language in a course given in an additional language, a second point of attention is the distinction between EMI and ICLHE. As extensively discussed by Macaro (2018), it remains far from straightforward to clearly define these approaches, to delineate the boundaries between them, and to specify the exact nature of each. In practice, this conceptual ambiguity results in a wide range of interpretations of EMI (Wilkinson and Gabriëls 2021), as ‘different stakeholders, often within the same program, place the EMI program at different points on the continuum’ (Curle et al. 2020, 13).

At the student level, the presence of the additional language affects their understanding of course objectives: is language proficiency part of what they are expected to develop, or is assessment based solely on content mastery (Gronchi 2024; Sahan and Şahan 2022)? Similar uncertainties are reported by teachers, who often experience ambiguity in their professional role. They tend to see themselves primarily as subject-matter experts and explicitly reject the role of language teachers, even if they are aware that the language used as the medium of instruction poses significant challenges for their students (Gronchi and Hopkyns 2025; Spero 2024). As stated by Galloway & Ruegg: ‘there is clearly a lack of consensus over both the aims of EMI programs and the roles of instructors and further research is needed to help inform faculty training programs’ (2022, 4).

Taken together, the literature reviewed above highlights two key tensions. First, while EMI programs theoretically position the target language solely as a medium of instruction, in practice it seems impossible – both for teaching and learning – to deny the presence of this additional language. Second, the EMI–ICLHE continuum, which may be unfamiliar to practitioners, remains subject to varied interpretations and blurred boundaries. In this context, students and teachers may face uncertainty about course objectives and about the instructor’s role regarding the presence of this additional language. Therefore, it is essential to consider how this additional language can be acknowledged, both at the pedagogical level – through teaching practices – and at the research level – through the terminology and conceptual continuum used.

## Research questions

Addressing these tensions, the present study aims to examine, through concrete practices, how teacher acknowledge the presence of the additional language in content courses given in an additional language, and to clarify the EMI–ICLHE continuum by providing illustrative examples of teaching practices.

Accordingly, the study is guided by the following research questions:

(1) In what ways can teachers account for the additional language in content courses?

The aim is to describe, through various teaching practices in courses delivered in English or Dutch at a French-speaking university, how the teachers identify and address potential language-related challenges in their course objectives, teaching strategies, and assessment methods. These practices, which we term ‘language-aware teaching practices’, demonstrate how teachers anticipate challenging disciplinary discourse features in an additional language and implement linguistic scaffolding.

(2) How can these language-aware teaching practices be positioned along the continuum from content-driven approaches (e.g. EMI) to content- and language-driven approaches (e.g. ICLHE/CLIL) in higher education?

The objective is to determine where these language-aware practices fall along the EMI–ICLHE continuum and to illustrate this continuum with concrete examples.

## Methodology

This study adopts a practice-based approach, in which teachers’ experiences serve as sites for theory building and pedagogical development. It aims to bridge theory and practice, as many scholars now advocate for stronger connections between practitioners and researchers (Rose 2019; Sato and Loewen 2022), also in the context of content courses given in an additional language in higher education (Macaro and Aizawa 2024).

In this section, we first clarify the specific multilingual context of this study and the pedagogical project in which this study took place (4.1). We then turn to the description of the methodology used to collect data (4.2).

### *Context of the study*

This study takes place in Belgium, a country that comprises three linguistic communities: the French-speaking community in the south (Wallonia), the Dutch-speaking community in the north (Flanders), and the German-speaking community in the east. Education is normally conducted in the language of the respective community, but some programs, or part of programs, are authorised in English, Dutch or German. The Brussels region falls under both the French-and Dutch-speaking communities and therefore hosts both French-speaking and Dutch-speaking schools and universities (Mettewie and Van Mensel 2023).

UCLouvain depends on the French-speaking community and has multiple campuses in Wallonia, in certain cases near the border with the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium, as well as in Brussels. This explains why, beyond the commonly current need for English, students also often need to develop proficiency in Dutch, particularly in some specific fields (Hilgsmann and Degraeve 2021). To meet these needs, the university offers, in addition to traditional language courses, disciplinary programs taught entirely in English, as well as multilingual programs French/English or Dutch/ English/French. Moreover, the university also offers to possibility to choose elective courses given in English or in Dutch, within a program in French. This implies that, unlike many universities, the programs are not systematically entirely given in English or in Dutch but are given in two or three different languages.

Given the importance of language needs in Belgium, UCLouvain decided in 2019 to conduct extensive consultations on language needs with faculty members, students, and alumni in order to develop a language plan for the coming years. From this consultation, UCLouvain has stated that disciplinary courses given in English and/or Dutch raised significant questions and challenges for students and teachers. Consequently, the Education Council of the university – composed of faculty representatives, student representatives, service units, and staff responsible for the management of teaching and learning – designated this topic as a priority and funded a pedagogical support project for the period 2022–2024. The project aimed to engage the university community around this topic while also providing scholarly and practical insights into the issue. As part of this initiative, communities of practice were established, from which the present study was developed.

### *Data collection and analysis*

The data presented in this study emerged from teachers' self-reported descriptions of their teaching practices, which were brought to light during sessions of the communities of practice (CoP) established as part of the pedagogical project described above. Communities of practice (CoP) are defined as 'groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis' (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002, 4). These communities were organised both to provide a framework for professional development – enabling content teachers to share experiences, draw inspiration from colleagues, and benefit from the guidance of the project leader – and to enrich the institutional pedagogical project and broader knowledge by documenting real-world teaching practices.

The discussions within these communities were initially intended for the purposes of the pedagogical project. The data were therefore not collected according to a predefined research protocol; rather, they emerged from the interactions. Recognising the illustrative value of these insights and their complementarity with existing theory, the project leader and author of this paper obtained permission from participants to share selected practices beyond the institution. This approach highlights teaching practices that provide rich, contextually grounded insights for research, even though the original project was designed for pedagogical development rather than formal scientific investigation.

The community of practice (CoP) unfolded over a period of three months and primarily consisted of two two-hour meetings, supplemented by written exchanges on an online platform, where participants could share information, experiences, and outcomes of pedagogical experimentation. Given participants' demanding schedules, the meetings were duplicated for two sub-groups, and some faculty members were unable to attend the collective sessions. In such cases, individual meetings were organised with the project leader – the author of this article. Importantly, participation in the discussions was entirely voluntary, and participants were under no obligation to share any information if they did not wish to do so. Sessions were not recorded, but the project leader took detailed notes of the discussions.

The two collective sessions focused on distinct themes. The first session centered on the teachers' perception of courses given in an additional language (e.g. potential advantages or risks, own experience, associated emotions ...). The second session focused on teaching practices. Participants were asked to describe their courses by answering three guiding questions:

- **Why** is my course taught in a language other than French (the institutional language)?
- **What** teaching methods do I use, how is the course organised?
- **How** is student learning assessed?

These communities were organised both to provide a framework for professional development – enabling content teachers to share experiences, draw inspiration from colleagues, and benefit from the guidance of the project leader – and to enrich the institutional pedagogical project and broader knowledge by documenting real-world teaching practices.<sup>7</sup>

These questions were designed to examine teaching practices of courses given in an additional language with respect to the three key components of the constructive alignment (Biggs 1996): learning objectives, instructional methods, and assessment. Following this initial analysis, participants were introduced to the concepts of EMI and ICLHE and were invited to situate their teaching practices along the EMI-ICLHE continuum, as presented in 2.1.

The data presented in this article emerged from the discussions that took place during the CoP. Since the written platform was used very little (only one teacher posted a message), this channel was not included in the analysis for this paper. The project leader identified four distinct pedagogical practices, that she selected because they acknowledge and address the presence of the additional language when defining course objectives, teaching methodologies, and assessment methods. The teaching practices of other participants are not reported in this study, either because they were not shared, because they closely resembled one of the four selected practices, or because they did not address the research questions of the study. As the CoP were originally part of a pedagogical support project rather than a formal scientific study, the sessions were not recorded and this study draws on detailed notes taken by the project leader and author of this study, documenting teachers' self-reported teaching practices during the CoP. When specific questions arose, additional information was gathered through individual exchanges with the teachers involved and/or through consultation of their course (e.g. course descriptions, instructional materials, etc.).

### *Participants*

These CoP brought together content teachers from various faculties. A call for participation distributed via email and through the university newsletter led to the voluntary involvement of twelve faculty members: nine from humanities and social sciences (law, psychology, economics, political science), two from science and technology (bioengineering and architecture), and one from the health sciences (biomedical sciences). The four teaching practices presented in this study concern a course in psychology, a course in law, a course in biomedical sciences, and a course in bioengineering.

## **Results**

### *In what ways can teachers account for the additional language in content courses?*

The following section presents, one by one, four pedagogical practices from courses taught in English or Dutch at a French-speaking university, focusing on how the additional language is acknowledged and addressed by the teachers in the course objectives, teaching methods, and assessment practices (RQ1). Describing these three components enables us to highlight the constructive alignment of these courses in terms of the attention paid to language (Biggs 1996).

#### *Teaching practice 1*

This teaching practice takes place within an elective English-taught course in the field of psychology, offered in the third year of an undergraduate (bachelor's) program. The faculty chose to offer this course in English in order to broaden the range of courses available to international or to local students seeking to follow a course in English.

#### *Objectives*

The primary objective of this course is disciplinary content: it aims to develop students' knowledge and understanding of psychology and does not include language learning outcome. However, students may use the course as an opportunity to maintain or further enhance their English skills if they wish. .

### *Teaching methods*

The course is taught in English by one professor. The lecture slides used during the sessions are in English and are made available on an online learning platform. Additional resources, including readings and videos, are also provided in English on this platform.

In addition, the course slides are available in French on the same platform. Supplementary materials (readings and videos), not identical but similar to those in English, are also offered in French. This dual-language provision is intended to give students who need or prefer it the option to study the course content in French.

### *Assessment*

Students are assessed through a written assignment and a written examination. For both components, students may choose the language of production – English or French. Language is not graded as such, but it must be understandable and appropriately used in relation to the course content.

### *Teaching practice 2*

This teaching practice is situated within a mandatory English-medium course in law, delivered in the second year of an undergraduate (bachelor's) program. It's recommended that students have reached at least a B1 level in English before entering the program.

### *Objectives*

The course's primary objective is to ensure students' mastery of disciplinary content related to Anglo-American law. However, the course also incorporates some attention to language activation – English in this case – as it aims to activate students' prior knowledge of English and to develop their familiarity with key English terminology in the field.

### *Teaching methods*

All teaching materials and activities are delivered in English. Being aware of the linguistic challenges of the students, the instructor provides various scaffolding tools: students receive a glossary of key terms, course materials are made available in advance and students are encouraged to read them before class, and additional texts are provided for further practice. The teacher also incorporates regular opportunities for interaction and discussion, enabling students to deepen their understanding of the subject matter while fostering productive language skills. Office hours are offered to address individual questions.

### *Assessment*

Assessment takes the form of a written examination in English. Students may use a translation dictionary during the exam. The instructor pays particular attention to linguistic accessibility when designing the exam: questions are formulated concisely using simplified language, and the specific vocabulary is restricted to terminology that students presumed to be known. Although general language proficiency is not assessed, answers must be comprehensible to the evaluator and the use of English-specific legal terminology must be accurate.

### *Teaching practice 3*

This teaching practice occurs in a mandatory English-taught biomedicine course during the master's program.

### *Objectives*

The course aims to impart disciplinary knowledge but also to develop some specific linguistic competencies: students are required to deliver an oral presentation in English on a scientific article,

demonstrating both a thorough understanding of the content and the ability to communicate effectively in English using language appropriate for academic presentations.

### *Teaching methods*

The course design relies on the practice of ‘a medical journal club’. Students are required to present an article to the group, paying careful attention to both content and language. To support their linguistic development, students follow some specific preparation sessions and receive targeted feedback on their English proficiency from an English language instructor. For the final assessment, students independently prepare and deliver a presentation on a different article.

### *Assessment*

Students are assessed on their mastery of the articles presented and the quality of their presentation and the language used. Ten percent of the grade is allocated specifically to language proficiency, as evaluated by the English language instructor.

### *Teaching practice 4*

This teaching practice takes place within an elective Dutch-taught course in the field of bioengineering, offered in the master’s program.

### *Objectives*

The learning objectives encompass both disciplinary knowledge and broad linguistic competencies in Dutch: by the end of the course, students are expected to comprehend a professional lecture delivered in Dutch within their field, provide an oral presentation of this in Dutch, reading related texts in Dutch and master specific vocabulary of the field in Dutch. Thus, the course aims simultaneously at mastering disciplinary content and developing broad language skills – listening comprehension, speaking, reading and specific vocabulary – in the target language.

### *Teaching methods*

The course alternates between lectures in Dutch on various topics related to the field of bioengineering given by different speakers and language proficiency sessions. The language sessions focus on the use, application, and consolidation of the linguistic resources related to the lecture. This includes reading scientific and popular science articles related to the topic under discussion, oral comprehension exercises, interactive speaking activities and lexical reinforcement exercises related to the lecture.

### *Assessment*

The assessment consisted of an oral presentation on one of the seminar topics, consisting of an in-depth exploration of the subject or of a specific aspect of the issue discussed, a vocabulary test based on the lexical field covered in each lecture and an individual oral exam based on a reading portfolio prepared by the student, linked to one of the seminars of their choice and to a related current topic. The productions were evaluated by a Dutch language teacher and a disciplinary teacher.

### *How can these language-aware teaching practices be positioned along the continuum from content-driven approaches (e.g. EMI) to content- and language-driven approaches (e.g. CLIL/ICLHE) in higher education?*

The four teaching practices presented above assign different levels of importance to the language and they illustrate distinct ways of acknowledging the presence of the additional language in a content course.

These practical examples can help us clarify the theoretical continuum between EMI and ICLHE by proposing an illustrated continuum of language-aware teaching practices that ranges from a content-

focused objective (e.g. EMI approach) to a dual focus on both content and language (e.g. ICLHE) (RQ2). This continuum is schematised in Figure 2.

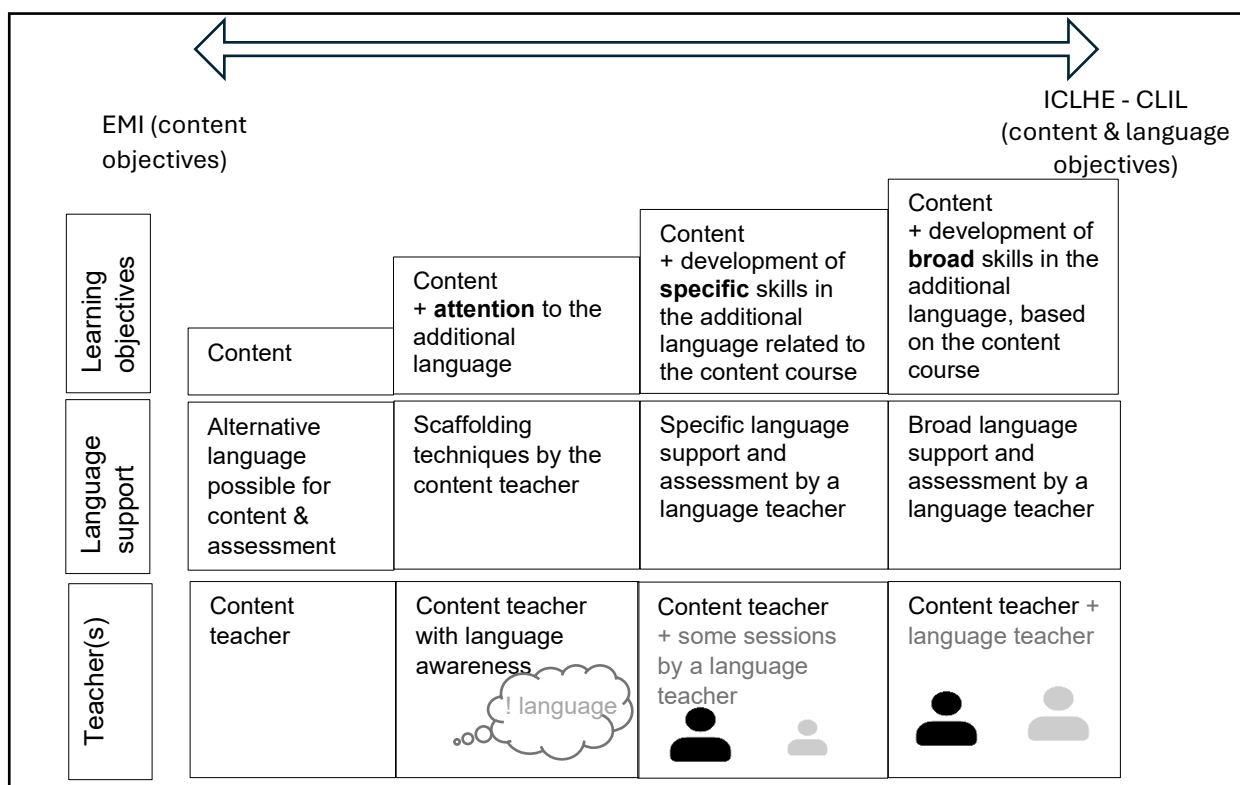


**Figure 2.** Illustrated EMI-ICLHE continuum in higher education based on four language-aware teaching practices.

On the content-driven side of the continuum, as in EMI, we find a course whose primary objective is disciplinary content (e.g. teaching practice 1). Language proficiency is not assessed. Since the language of instruction may pose difficulties for some students, the instructor offers the possibility of studying the material and completing the assessment in another language that is commonly shared by many students, such as the institutional language. This approach ensures that all students can demonstrate solid mastery of the content. In this scenario, the course is taught by a single teacher, the content specialist. The language used during the classes is English, but the teacher offers the possibility to students to master the content and to be assessed in an alternative language. This practice enables the institution to offer courses in English when needed, while allowing room for the use of another language or other languages within a multilingual perspective.

At one step further along the continuum, the main focus of the course remains on disciplinary content, yet some attention is given to the additional language (e.g. teaching practice 2). The aim is to activate students' existing linguistic competences and to foster the acquisition of field-specific terminology in an additional language. The instructor is aware that the language of instruction may constitute a challenge for students and therefore adopts several language-sensitive and scaffolding practices: providing a multilingual glossary, offering supplementary materials (such as texts or videos), encouraging multilingual interactions in small groups, monitoring the language used during examinations, and allowing the use of dictionaries. The course is taught by a single instructor, a content specialist, who, alongside this primary role, is also a language-aware practitioner attentive to students' linguistic needs and difficulties. He is however not a language teacher.

Closer to the CLIL/ ICLHE approach are practices that pursue a dual objective: disciplinary content learning and the development of language skills. These linguistic skills may be specific and targeted (e.g. teaching practice 3). In such cases, the primary focus of the course remains the disciplinary content, but in order to foster particular language abilities (e.g. oral presentation skills), a language specialist

intervenes during specific training sessions. Consequently, two instructors are involved in the course: a content teacher, who delivers the majority of the instruction, and a language teacher, who provides targeted interventions focusing on specific linguistic aspects directly related to the disciplinary content. Assessment primarily concerns the disciplinary knowledge, while the language teacher evaluates the specific linguistic competence that has been addressed.

On the CLIL/ICLHE-side continuum, we find a teaching practice where there is an equivalent dual focus on disciplinary content mastery and the development of language skills (e.g. teaching practice 4). To achieve this balance, the language course is designed on the basis of the disciplinary content sessions. Drawing on these sessions, the language teacher develops complementary activities that target various linguistic competences. Thus, two instructors alternate and work in close coordination: a content specialist and a language teacher. Assessment is jointly conducted and gives equal weight to the mastery of disciplinary content and to language proficiency. This practice falls within the broader CLIL approach: it explicitly integrates both content and language learning objectives through coordinated collaboration between content and language teachers for the teaching and assessment activities.

### Discussion and limitations

In this article, our aim was to bring theory and classroom practice into closer dialogue to address two central questions. First, we sought to understand how, in a university-level content course delivered through an additional language, the content specialist manages the presence of that language as previous studies have shown that this language can represent significant challenges for students and teachers (Charoenpornsook and Thumvichit 2025; Evans and Morrison 2018; Klaassen 2001). Second, we examined how these language-aware classroom-practices position themselves within the EMI-CLIL/ICLHE continuum, in the context of higher education, as the exact nature of these approaches is subject to discussions (Macaro 2018). By doing so, we set out to share pedagogical practices in order to clarify theory, as suggested by Macaro 2018.

Drawing on self-reported teaching practices from a community of practice (CoP) involving twelve instructors, we presented four distinct language-aware content courses in English- and Dutch-medium courses (EMI/DMI) at a French-speaking university. These practices revealed a continuum of language integration, ranging from minimising linguistic barriers (e.g. allowing content and assessment in the institutional language) to explicitly developing language skills (e.g. co-teaching with language specialists).

The described teaching practices allow us to identify several issues relevant to current definitions of EMI and ICLHE/CLIL. Regarding EMI, Macaro's definition (2018) frames English as a medium of instruction, often being interpreted as excluding language-focused objective (Curle et al. 2020). Yet this conceptualisation faces tension with classroom realities, where the use of an additional language induces learning challenges (Evans and Morrison 2018). In light of this discrepancy, McKinley (2024) underscored the need to refine the definition of EMI by explicitly acknowledging the role of language. He argues that EMI practices, whether explicit or implicitly, inevitably involve some objective related to the development of English language skills:

EMI is the teaching of academic content through English in settings where other languages have traditionally been used as mediums of instruction, with an intention, stated or unstated, of developing learners' skills for using English for specific academic purposes. (McKinley 2024, paragr. introduction)

Our practice analysis nuances this view: instructors may address language without treating language as a learning outcome barrier, for example by allowing alternative languages for content and assessment. This way, the teacher maintains a focus on content while helping students with potential language-related difficulties. At the same time, this approach also supports multilingualism, often described as threatened by EMI-practices (Phillipson and Kabel 2024), but clearly present in courses taught through an additional language, as stated by the EMEMUS concept (Dafouz and Smit 2016).

Regarding the terms CLIL and ICLHE, our analysis of teaching practices shows that the dual objectives ‘content and language’ in higher education also implies a dual form of teaching intervention: content specialists and language specialists collaborate so that students can acquire the language skills related to the content class. These practices, already described and encouraged in previous studies (Lasagabaster 2018; Lu 2022), reflect the particular conditions of higher education, where both disciplinary knowledge and linguistic demands are highly specialised. In such contexts, the language used is often so specific that content lecturers can offer only limited linguistic support. Although the concept of ICLHE was introduced precisely to account for the specificity of the higher-education context, our analysis suggests that it should also incorporate an additional dimension: beyond a certain threshold of linguistic complexity, content instructors rely on the expertise of a language specialist. This highlights the limits of content experts’ ability to address advanced linguistic goals within highly specialised academic settings.

Our study also aimed to position the described language-aware practices on the EMI (content-driven approach)-CLIL/ICLHE (content- and language- driven approach) continuum and better delineate the boundaries between these approaches. Our findings reveal a gradation in the extent to which the additional language is integrated into course objectives: from minimising linguistic barriers to explicitly developing language skills. This illustrated continuum is helpful for both researchers and practitioners. At research level, these examples clarify the concrete realities, particularly regarding how the additional language is acknowledged, beyond theoretical concepts. For practitioners, these clarifications are particularly crucial in the context of university foreign-language instruction, where teachers are often asked *just to teach content in English* and might not know how to handle this language. Providing concrete examples of classroom practices can help them navigate course design, clarify intended learning outcomes, and make informed choices regarding teaching methods and assessment strategies. These examples provide also concrete, replicable models for institutions seeking to support students and instructors in courses given in additional language. By illustrating how language-aware practices can be implemented, they offer actionable guidance for developing targeted institutional policies.

While our practice-based analysis provides concrete examples and empirical clarification of theoretical concepts, our study also shows certain limitations that future research should address.

Although the present study provides an overview of some pedagogical practices, it did not aim to constitute an exhaustive inventory of all techniques currently implemented in EMI/CLIL contexts. Additional, potentially innovative and inspiring practices remain therefore undocumented. It would be interesting in future research to describe more pedagogical practices, and further detail the illustrated continuum EMI-CLIL in higher education.

Another limitation concerns our focus on describing practices rather than empirically assessing their effects. The actual impact and efficiency of these strategies on student learning, as well as students’ perceptions of their usefulness, were beyond the scope of the present investigation. Addressing this limitation will require evaluation-driven and action-based research designs capable of capturing both learning outcomes as well as students and teachers’ perspectives in authentic instructional settings.

Finally, although the study touches on collaborative approaches such as team-teaching, it does not examine the practical and interpersonal challenges that such arrangements entail. Previous research has shown that team-teaching can be challenging but also motivational (Lasagabaster 2018). Future research should explore the conditions under which the team-teaching practices as described here can be sustainably implemented, with particular attention to institutional support structures, professional development opportunities, and strategies for fostering effective collaboration between content and language instructors.

## Conclusion

Content courses delivered through an additional language – most commonly English – have become increasingly widespread in European and global higher education. This practice has been labelled in many different ways, but a commonly distinction is made between the concept of EMI, which frames the language primarily as a medium for content transmission, whereas notions such as CLIL or ICLHE emphasise a dual focus on content and language learning. Yet these distinctions often sit uneasily with teaching realities, where instructors face linguistic challenges and must determine how to handle this additional language within their content course.

Taking a practice-based approach where pedagogical practices can lead to theoretical insights, we aimed to share possible language-aware teaching practices, i.e. practices that account for the presence of the additional language in learning objectives, teaching methods and assessment, without necessarily making language development a stated objective. These examples were then used to formulate an EMI/ICLHE continuum that explicitly recognises the presence of the additional language. Therefore, we described four language aware teaching practices of English- and Dutch-medium courses at a French-speaking university selected during a community of practice organised for a pedagogical project. These revealed a gradation in the extent to which the target language can be acknowledged and addressed in course objectives and teaching methods and assessment: the first practice introduces an alternative language to support learning and assessment; the second relies on various forms of pedagogical support (e.g. scaffolding techniques, multilingual resources) whereas the final two developed a collaboration with a language teacher to aim at linguistic outcomes – either narrowly defined (practice 3) or more broadly conceived (practice 4). Based on these descriptions, we positioned the four practices along the EMI–ICLHE continuum, to clarify the boundaries between pedagogical approaches and to show how they differently handle the additional language within content courses.

This study contributes to refining theoretical constructs through practice-based insights, providing clarity at both the research and pedagogical levels. At the theoretical level, this research contributes to refining conceptual models of EMI and ICLHE through teaching-informed evidence: while concepts about content-driven approaches often neglect the presence of the additional language, the described teaching practices show how this language can be considered by teachers even in content-focused courses. At pedagogical level, it offers practical guidance for instructors and institutions suggesting ways to support courses given in an additional language that consider the presence of this language. More broadly, it contributes to ongoing discussions about teaching and learning in multilingual and multicultural academic contexts, emphasising that the language of instruction is not merely a medium but a pedagogical factor that requires deliberate attention.

In today's higher education landscape, instructors must go beyond 'just teaching content'. Since the language of the course is increasingly often not the students' mother tongue, recognising language as a central component of teaching and learning is crucial to ensuring both equitable access to education and high-quality learning outcomes.

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